







Using interpreters to access services: user views

People who speak little English need interpreters in order to use health, legal, social welfare and education services. Most evaluations of interpreting provision have been conducted from a service provider perspective. This in-depth study, by researchers from London South Bank University, Salford University and the LSE, examined the experiences of people who need interpreters. The research found that:

-  People decide for themselves what level of English proficiency is necessary on particular occasions, and who is best able to meet their need for an interpreter. Sometimes they feel they can manage themselves, sometimes they seek help from a family member, friend or professional interpreter. Specialist help is seen as important in medical or legal matters.
-  A good interpreter is regarded as someone who does more than change words into another language. People prefer proactive interpreters who can empathise with them, help with understanding procedures and plead their case. The personal character, attitude and trustworthiness of an interpreter are seen as crucially important.
-  There is a lack of knowledge about who is a professional interpreter and how to get access to one. Even people who know how to access them often have difficulties in obtaining one.
-  Experiences of professional interpreters are mixed. On the one hand users can value them for their knowledge of medical and legal systems, and can establish trust with an individual interpreter they get to know over time. On the other hand users are often critical of them, feeling that service providers control provision and that they have an uncaring attitude or are even actively against them.
-  People mostly prefer family or friends to interpret for them. They trust them because they have an ongoing relationship with them that includes emotional commitment and loyalty.
-  The researchers conclude that training in the basics of interpreting should be made more widely available to members of minority ethnic communities who regularly act as interpreters for family members or friends. Refocusing professional interpreting services to allow for a 'case load' approach, where feasible, would help to build the ongoing, trusting relationship between service user and interpreter that users want.

Background

"One time the housing office didn't pay my rent. I went to housing and they brought an interpreter. We asked them to pay my housing but they told me they didn't pay my rent any more. So I came back and brought one of my friends. He explained my situation to them and they accepted it. This is the difference between good and bad [interpreting], as I said. I know that the interpreter didn't interpret my words exactly. That's why they refused me the first time ... Actually I look on [an interpreter from a service provider] as a government agent. I don't feel safe." (Nedim, a Kurdish man)

People who most need to use health, legal, social welfare and education services may be least able to do so because of language difficulties. Currently, the policy emphasis is on provision of English language classes as part of integration into British society, rather than on providing the sort of interpreting services that people want. There will, however, continue to be people who speak little or no English and who need interpreters in order to access services.

Government Acts concerning service provision are often accompanied by memoranda and codes of practice that recommend the use of interpreters where users speak little or no English. There is, however, an acute lack of permanent in-house interpreters across a range of social provision. Interpreting services often have ad hoc and uncertain funding. There are no established national guidelines or standards for interpreting provision, but there is a growing emphasis on professionalisation, with recognised training and qualifications for interpreters.

Evaluation of interpreting provision, however, has largely been conducted from a service provider perspective. There has been little work looking at users' experiences of (professional and informal) interpreters. This research examined the views of 50 people who need interpreters in order to use health, welfare and other services. The interviewees all spoke little or no English, and were from Bangladeshi, Chinese, Indian, Kurdish and Polish minority groups.

Who is a good interpreter?

People's decisions about requiring an interpreter were not only influenced by their level of English language proficiency but also by the circumstances in which they were accessing services:

"If I get an average Englishman I can cope ... I can make myself understood. I wouldn't say [my English] was good ... It's a good idea to take a professional when it's important." (Jan Lepak, a Polish Roma man)

The need for informal or professional interpreters could also change over the life course. Some older people commented that they used to speak English well enough to manage for themselves, but that in old age they had forgotten what English they had known and now needed someone to interpret for them.

In talking about who made a good interpreter, people were concerned about an interpreter's language proficiency in both their own mother tongue and in English. They felt that service providers were often unaware of the range of different dialects within each language. They often judged an interpreter's English proficiency by the outcome of the situation.

Language matching and proficiency were not enough, however. Most people felt that an interpreter's character and attitude were of primary importance. Generally, they wanted an interpreter who would empathise with them:

"It must be someone who is sympathetic to people generally. Some people are better than others at this. It doesn't matter if their Polish is fantastic if they are cold to people." (Mrs Polanska, a Polish woman)

Most people liked interpreters to be proactive, pleading their case and giving advice. They appreciated interpreters who had knowledge of service procedures as well as technical language ability:

"[An interpreter] should give good advice. That's what I believe. Giving advice is helpful, whatever the case. Clients can benefit because they don't have knowledge of the laws and procedures." (Bijal Patel, an Indian man)

Using professional interpreters

Generally, people were confused about the status of interpreters who had been provided for them by services. They did not seem to have been told about the position or role of the interpreter. Indeed,

sometimes they did not even know the name of the person who had interpreted for them. There was also a lack of knowledge about how to get hold of a professional interpreter, or who would meet the cost.

Even people who did know how to obtain a professional interpreter could experience difficulties in access. One of these difficulties was a quite basic hurdle: the service could not always be booked unless you spoke English. Other difficulties were connected to lack of reliability, with no interpreter who spoke their language available when they needed one, or a booked interpreter turning up too late or not at all.

Some people had positive things to say about professional interpreters. This included their knowledge of the way service procedures worked and of specialist terms, especially in medical or legal matters. They also appreciated their code of confidentiality, and that they put their client first rather than holding a hidden personal or institutional agenda. In particular, good experiences of professional interpreters were associated with being provided with the same interpreter over a number of occasions, enabling people to get to know and trust them:

"The interpreter who was with us all the time knew me and my husband very well, even to the extent that we became friendly ... I trust her and never came across a situation where I did not. She knew everything. She never said anything she shouldn't have and she is an honest kind of woman." (Mrs Topolska, a Polish woman)

Most people, however, were critical of interpreters provided by services. They felt that professional interpreters were there to represent the service providers or their own interests, not those of users. In their experience, professional interpreters did not meet the qualities that they felt were important:

"I must admit I wasn't happy with the Home Office interpreter ... I expected that interpreter to explain about my psychological situation but he didn't ... It all depends on an interpreter's character. Some of them I don't trust because of their attitude." (Dersim, a Kurdish man)

"Those who work [at the hospital] aren't likely to be on your side in an argument, so you're better off taking someone with you." (Mr Matejko, a Polish man)

Using family and friends as interpreters

Most people had used people from their informal networks as interpreters to enable them to use services. In contrast to professional interpreters, family and friends were often readily available, could help with everyday matters and with transport, and did not require payment. Some people did feel that there were drawbacks to using family and friends, such as embarrassment and concerns about privacy. They also felt that family and friends did not always have knowledge of service procedures and specialist terms.

Generally, however, the majority of people preferred drawing on their informal networks to act as interpreters for them in all but important legal and medical matters. They trusted family and friends, rather than interpreters who were strangers to them, because they knew each other well and had a history of shared understandings and obligations:

"My friends are good enough, they will interpret for me ... I may need help to buy something or solve some problem. Normally I take them out to tea in return ... The advantage is that my friends will treat me sincerely and they will always tell me the truth and provide good suggestions ... Professional interpreters have too many clients each day, they do not have the time and energy to please everyone." (Di Wu, a Chinese man)

"I have not come across [confidentiality] as an issue because my husband is there for me [as an interpreter] ... Our friends don't betray us in such situations, as you know. If my brother-in-law or sister-in-law is there, they don't betray me." (Neha Varma, an Indian woman)

"[Taking a friend] helps me a lot and it gives me confidence ... I think if I take [a friend], then he or she will understand my feelings, and if [a service] gets someone, he or she will outline the questions and answers and will not understand everything." (Dipon Ghosh, a Bangladeshi man)

Conclusion

The role and practice of interpreters have become increasingly professionalised over the last decade or so. There is now a stress on codes or guidelines for standards of behaviour and practice. These include:

maintaining impartiality and avoiding prejudice, fidelity to meaning in interpreting, intervention only for the purposes of clarification, maintaining confidentiality. These are not a complete match with the qualities that people who need interpreters value.

People with little English usually need to use a professional interpreter at some stage, when they cannot draw on their informal networks or in circumstances such as serious medical or legal matters. People recognise that knowledge of service procedures and specialist terms is beneficial, but they see the role of interpreter as involving more than the transfer of words across languages. In particular, they place an emphasis on the interpreter being proactive on their behalf, and especially on their personal character, attitude and trustworthiness. They want the advantages of familiarity and knowledge of the person who is acting as interpreter for them.

In sum, people want either a family member or friend who has professional skills and expertise, and who demonstrates some of the qualities evident in professional codes of good practice, or a professional interpreter who fulfils the obligations inherent in their role and is a proactive and familiar person.

Two mutually compatible overall recommendations arise from this study:

- Wider availability of training in the basics of interpreting provision for members of different minority ethnic communities who are bilingual, especially those who regularly act as interpreters for family members or friends. This would take the form of short courses, rather than extended training, and would include information about health, legal and other service procedures and specialist terms.
- Inclusion in good practice and organisational procedures for professional interpreters, where possible, of: taking responsibility for a 'case load' of clients with whom they establish an ongoing relationship, clarifying who they are when they meet their clients, taking on a more proactive role.

The study also found that people who need professional interpreters would benefit from being provided with more information about how to access their services.

About the project

Researchers based at London South Bank University, Salford University and the London School of Economics carried out an in-depth study of people who need interpreters to access services. Semi-structured interviews were carried out during 2002 with a total of 50 people, ten from each of the following groups, in their first language: Chinese and Kurdish people living in Greater London, and Bangladeshi, Indian and Polish people living in Greater Manchester. These ethnic groups represent a variety of experiences of migration to and settlement in Britain with regard to length of presence and levels of integration or marginalisation. Interviewees in the sample groups were of both genders and a range of ages.

How to get further information

The full report, **Access to services with interpreters: user views** by Claire Alexander, Rosalind Edwards and Bogusia Temple, with Usha Kanani, Liu Zhuang, Mohib Miah and Anita Sam, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 228 6, price £14.95).